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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000066

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: HRANT DINK: DISCUSSION WITH USCIRF ON RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM IN TURKEY

REF: A. ISTANBUL 0044

[B](#). 06 ISTANBUL 2104

[C](#). 06 ANKARA 6529

[D](#). ISTANBUL 0061

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

[1](#)1. (C) The tragic murder of Armenian Turkish human rights advocate Hrant Dink on January 19 was a tremendous loss for Turkey (ref A). Embassy and Consulate staff had frequent contact with Dink over the years, most recently on November 14, 2006 when he met with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in Istanbul (ref B). The following excerpts are taken from his responses to the Commissioners' questions. The last statement in particular resonates given the circumstances associated with his assassination: "Historically, negative moments are not based on religion but rather nationalism."

On the Status of Religious Freedom and Minorities in Turkey

[1](#)2. (C) "On the surface there is religious freedom -- churches, schools and ability to worship are unrestricted; but this type of freedom is misleading. It is like a bird which in theory is free to fly, except that it has broken wings."

[1](#)3. (C) "I am slightly against the idea of considering minority communities as religious minorities. Armenians have been living in this land for 4000 years; now, unfortunately, they have been 'downsized' to a religious community -- this is not acceptable. Turkey is secular and doesn't consider its own Turkish majority a religious community but considers minority groups as a religious minority; this creates problems. Since the beginning of the Republic, Turkey has never considered minorities as its own citizens, despite the Lausanne Treaty and Constitutional protections of equality of citizens. Sixty thousand Armenians remain as second class citizens. The State has always approached them as a security threat but numbers are so small today that they are no longer considered a threat and can be viewed as antiquity. Turkey is trying to capitalize on this. Even today the community is not provided with real rights."

On the new Foundations Law and EU Accession

[1](#)4. (C) "There has been some discussion about property being returned (to minority foundations) by the State (ref C). The Opposition has equated this with a return to (the Treaty of) Sevres. The State broke the wings of our birds by taking

away our properties, which we depended on for income. Minority groups are treated as foreigners in the new law. The problem in Turkey is not the quality of legislation but rather, the manner in which it is enforced. The EU accession process is based on fear, not willingness, which explains why it is going so slowly."

On Islamic Extremism, Islam-oriented Democracy and Kemalism

15. (C) "Extremism of any kind can be controlled by the 'deep state.' There is a very big difference between the Turkey of 30 years ago and now. Thirty years ago, (former PM) Erbakan was the main actor who portrayed Christianity as an enemy and Westerners as non-believers but today we have a party with roots in Islam that has strengthened ties with the West. At the same time, some extremists do exist but have only a small role."

16. (C) "We have witnessed throughout history that secularism has used religion to its own benefit. The rise of Islam-oriented freedom/democracy is an opportunity for religious minorities. Real secularism in Turkey could be achieved through the various religions exercising their freedoms. We are moving towards real secularism through democratization. Kemalists are still afraid. Turkey could be a good model for neighbors."

17. (C) When asked which political party in Turkey embodied "true secularism," Dink responded, "AKP." When asked if he was afraid, as a religious minority member, of the rising power of an Islam-oriented party, he responded, "No."

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18. (C) When asked what comfort he had that giving up Kemalism wouldn't lead to Sharia Law, Dink replied, "I don't believe it will lead to Sharia Law, but rather (it will lead to) democracy." Asked why he believed this, Dink responded, "Kemalists are not democratic. I was tried by a Kemalist government for stating that I was Armenian. I have never had such an experience with Islamic leadership."

19. (C) When asked why he didn't think political Islam would lead to Sharia Law in Turkey as it had in other parts of the world, Dink answered, "The Western world is just starting to understand multi-cultural coexistence. It is a new development in the West that different cultures co-exist. It started in the U.S. 80 years ago and in the EU 40 years ago. The Western world is challenged by this. I can honestly say that as a Christian living in the Muslim world I am very lucky in comparison. Historically, negative moments are not based on religion but rather nationalism."

110. (C) Comment: Underscoring the complexities and fluidity of Turkey's religious minorities' situation, we learned from Armenian Patriarchate officials that both Dink and his wife Rakel, who made an eloquent plea for reconciliation at the commencement of his funeral cortege (ref D), are evangelica/protestant Christians -- not Armenian orthodox -- the Patriarchate funeral notwithstanding. Patriarchate officials attributed Rakel's eloquence to her experience as a lay "house preacher," adding that she has a large congregation of female adherents. End comment.
JONES